

Review of *How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind: Madness and Black Radical Creativity* by La Marr Jurelle Bruce (Duke University Press)

by [Liz Miller](#) | [Issue 11.2 \(Fall 2022\)](#), [Book Reviews](#)

ABSTRACT *How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind* offers a poignant study of what author La Marr Jurelle Bruce calls “mad methodology,” extending care and consideration to Black artists historically, fictionally, and contemporaneously rendered mad by oppressive anti-Black capitalist discursive practices. Reflecting on the creative practices of Buddy Bolden, Nina Simone, Lauryn Hill, and Dave Chappelle, among others, Bruce provides a clear-cutting analysis of the ways normative cultural logics work to figure Black art and protest as inherently mad.

KEYWORDS [anti-Blackness](#), [disability](#), [Black studies](#), [race](#), [methodology](#), [mad studies](#)

How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind: Madness and Black Radical Creativity. By La Marr Jurelle Bruce. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021. 345 pp. (paperback) ISBN: 979-1-4780-1087-6. US List: \$28.95.

La Marr Jurelle Bruce's *How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind: Madness and Black Radical Creativity* “is simple solidarity born of likeness and shared experience” (234). Here, at the end of the book, the author discloses his own encounters with madness and shares his identity as a Mad Black scholar “writing a mad black book while braving an antiblack-antimad world” (234). *How to Go Mad* is a love story, a potent reflection on a few of the many Black creative minds who have innovated art forms and fashioned the trajectory of history, while having their “sanity” called into question by normative, white, anti-Black, anti-Mad audiences and institutions.

An important note on language: it has become common in many academic and activist spaces to capitalize marginalized identity categories, like *Black* or *Mad* as a sign of respect. *The New York Times*, for example, takes its cue from W.E.B. Du Bois in electing to capitalize the “B” in Black ([Coleman, 2020](#) <

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/05/insider/capitalized-black.html>). *How to Go Mad* breaks with such practices, and for good reason:

I use a lowercase *b* because I want to emphasize an *improper* blackness; a blackness that is a 'critique of the proper'; a blackness that is collectivist rather than individualistic; a blackness that is 'never closed and always under contestation'; a blackness that is ever-unfurling rather than rigidly fixed; a blackness that is neither capitalized nor propertized via the protocols of Western grammar; a blackness that centers those who are typically regarded as lesser and *lower cases*. (6)

Such is the undercurrent running through the text.

Chapter 1, "Mad is a Place," connects madness and Blackness through multiple experiential nodes. For example, Bruce mobilizes Foucault's "ship of fools" and Hortense Spillers' work to conceptualize what he calls a "mad diaspora," an "emergence of unprecedented diasporic subjectivities, ontologies, and possibilities that transgress national and rational norms" (2–3). *How to Go Mad* is fundamentally a book about ontology and a mad methodology that compassionately attunes to the lived experiences of folks residing at the intersection of Mad and Black, however those terms may be defined historically, culturally, institutionally, communally, and personally. The work of this chapter is to call into question Western modernity's emphasis on rationalism as akin to "sanity" and to focus instead on "those purported rants, raves, rambles, outbursts, mumbles, stammers, slurs, gibberish sounds, and unseemly silences that defy the grammars of Reason" (9). Because institutional Reason has historically steeped itself in anti-Black, saneist discourse, Bruce finds it only natural that those experiencing such structural violence would "go mad" or rage against the machine of racial capitalism. His mad methodology "recognizes mad persons as critical theorists and decisive protagonists in struggles for liberation" (9).

The next chapter, "'He Blew His Brains Out through His Trumpet': Buddy Bolden and the Impossible Sound of Madness," encourages readers to listen to the traces of Mad music reverberating across time. Bolden, a Black radical creator of the late-nineteenth century who stepped out of tune, so to speak, inaugurated the figure of the *mad jazzman*, one consciously taken up by later musical artists, including Sun Ra and Charles Mingus. Highlighting the self-mythologizing and queer speculation undergirding the latter men's lives and careers, *How to Go Mad* dexterously showcases the tools of Bruce's mad methodology: "looking and listening for the phantoms, otherworldly beings, and disembodied voices that speak in their narratives; discerning where disclosures of pathology are also articulations of philosophy; and extending radical compassion to both men" (60). Sun Ra, for example, presented himself as a space and time traveler, a self-narrative that troubles Western reason and calls into question its emphasis on whiteness and normalcy. This section thus provides readers with a concrete examination of lessons

gleaned through listening to Black madness across history, uncovering a philosophical orientation that invites creative, perhaps eccentric, relations to the status quo.

Chapter 3, "The Blood-Stain Bed," similarly reflects on rationalist society, this time in analyzing the violence engendered in those who have been broken down by subjugation and trauma. Eva Canada, the protagonist of Gayle Jones's *Eva's Man* (1976), kills a lover after suffering a life of constant sexual abuse. Rather than condone such an act of murder, Bruce asserts "our primary impulse must not be to discard Eva or retaliate against her—but rather to abolish the structures that erect and uphold the blood-stained bed" (99).

Madness begets a knowledge of those structures that must be overthrown, if only we are willing to extend compassion to individuals experiencing that madness—including ourselves. Importantly, Bruce's compassion is not "*moderate* compassion, *ordinary* compassion, or *easy* compassion" (99), as evidenced by his repudiation of anti-Black normative structures rather than outright rejection of the character Eva. It is a *radical* compassion that acknowledges Black trauma, sympathizing with an individual's circumstances even if one does not condone violent action.

We see such lessons taken up again in the following chapter, "A Portrait of the Artist as a Mad Black Woman," particularly in Bruce's emphasis on the inextricable link between madness and Blackness: "To be black in the thick of antiblack worlds is a condition of such trauma, such chaos, such strangeness, such wonder, such alterity, such uncertainty, such antagonism, that it often feels mad" (137). Importantly, though, *How to Go Mad* posits that instead of passing as sane in a crazymaking world, folks might re-envision the very parameters of madness as something one "can claim, wield, and *do*; something that one might learn to do *well*; something that might be adopted as methodology and praxis" (137, emphasis in original).

The remaining three chapters of *How to Go Mad* provide discussions of what this new mad methodology entails—not just listening to and respecting the voices of the Mad, but Black folks' harnessing of the madness imbued through contact with white supremacy. Bruce presents Lauryn Hill's "embrace of madness for song-making, self-making, and worldmaking" (140) and Dave Chappelle's embrace of paranoia, despite its medical pathologizing, as a necessary mode of survival—two examples of many of "black people going mad in order not to lose their minds or their lives" (193).

Finally, Bruce, via discussion of the musical stylings of Nina Simone, Kendrick Lamar, Frank Ocean, and others, suggests the concept of *madtime*. This term "signifies various modes of doing time and feeling time coinciding with spasms and rhythms of madness. . . . It tears calendars, smashes clocks, ignores calls for timeliness," thereby defying "the Eurocentric, heteronormative, capitalist, rationalist clock-time that reigns in the modern West" (204). In this last chapter, "Songs in Madtime: Black Music, Madness, and Metaphysical

Syncopation," Black radical creativity in the form of music provides blueprints for living out of key with anti-Black, anti-Mad realities.

The book encourages attunement to practices of mad knowledge-making for the sake of self-preservation, survival, activism, and scholarship in a world that continues to seek the destruction of that which is not white, able-minded, and heteronormative. Bruce, fortunately, shows us an alternative ontology, one that attempts to productively grapple with "black rage," "at once a symptom of antiblack trauma, a defense against antiblack trauma, and a mighty force in battles against anti-blackness" (24). Importantly, this rage revels in creativity, madness in all its forms, community, and love.

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Liz Miller, "Review of *How to Go Mad without Losing Your Mind: Madness and Black Radical Creativity* by La Marr Jurelle Bruce (Duke University Press)," *Lateral* 11.2 (2022).

<https://doi.org/10.25158/L11.2.27>

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ISSN 2469-4053